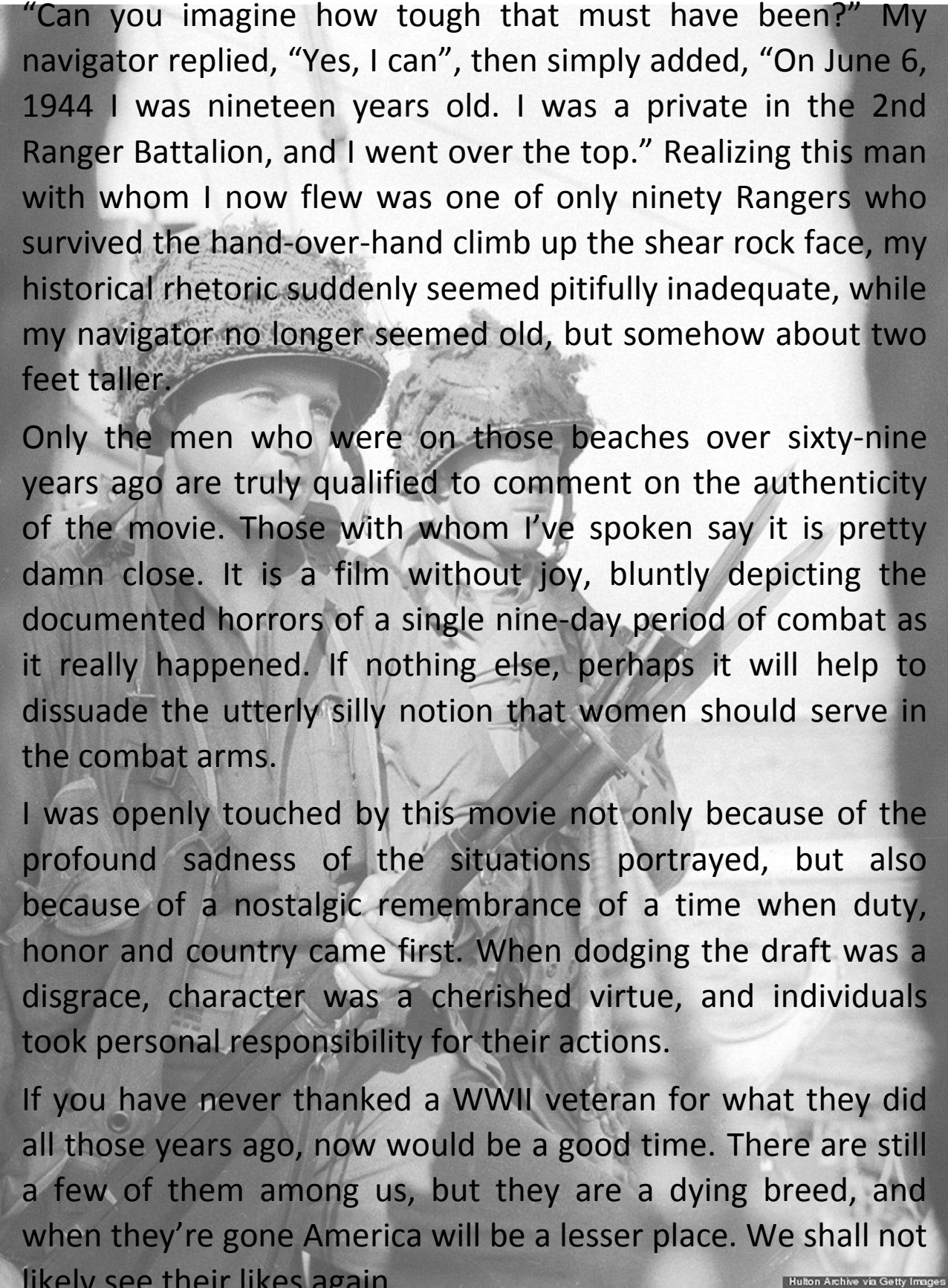


Remembering D-Day, June 6, 1944

The first time I saw the movie “Saving Private Ryan”, it moved me to tears. Since I was born in 1935, I was only a kid during World War II, but not so young I didn’t realize what was going on. Growing up during that era forever left me with an abiding admiration for a generation of Americans who not only endured the Great Depression, but also unflinchingly stepped forward to do their duty when our country called.

As a young United States Air Force officer I was stationed in France only a few hours driving time from the beaches at Normandy. Early on a June morning in 1961, I drove to the site where seventeen years earlier the Allied Forces of Operation Overlord had landed. As the sun rose over Omaha Beach, the hair on the back of my neck literally stood on end as I gazed in awe at the utterly devastating field-of-fire commanded from a crumbling German bunker. Some nineteen years later, I would experience this same profound sensation as I stood atop the hill, Little Round Top, at the Gettysburg Battlefield in Pennsylvania.

Later in 1962, while flying along the Normandy coast at low altitude, I was presenting what I thought to be a noteworthy historical tour to my navigator, a major who looked “pretty old” to me. Flying west from the British and Canadian beaches of Sword, Juno and Gold, I pointed out a 100 foot cliff named Pointe du Hoc that lay between the American beaches of Omaha and Utah. After describing the remarkable D-Day assault up its near vertical face by U.S. Army Rangers, I said,



“Can you imagine how tough that must have been?” My navigator replied, “Yes, I can”, then simply added, “On June 6, 1944 I was nineteen years old. I was a private in the 2nd Ranger Battalion, and I went over the top.” Realizing this man with whom I now flew was one of only ninety Rangers who survived the hand-over-hand climb up the shear rock face, my historical rhetoric suddenly seemed pitifully inadequate, while my navigator no longer seemed old, but somehow about two feet taller.

Only the men who were on those beaches over sixty-nine years ago are truly qualified to comment on the authenticity of the movie. Those with whom I’ve spoken say it is pretty damn close. It is a film without joy, bluntly depicting the documented horrors of a single nine-day period of combat as it really happened. If nothing else, perhaps it will help to dissuade the utterly silly notion that women should serve in the combat arms.

I was openly touched by this movie not only because of the profound sadness of the situations portrayed, but also because of a nostalgic remembrance of a time when duty, honor and country came first. When dodging the draft was a disgrace, character was a cherished virtue, and individuals took personal responsibility for their actions.

If you have never thanked a WWII veteran for what they did all those years ago, now would be a good time. There are still a few of them among us, but they are a dying breed, and when they’re gone America will be a lesser place. We shall not likely see their likes again.